

The Festival of the Reformation (Observed), Sunday, October 25, 2020

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Fake News, Fact Checking, and Jesus

John 8:31–36

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (vv 31–32).

Let’s do a little thought experiment. What if Jesus had said these words in an age of fake news and fact checking? How would He be received and heard?

3.A.

Jesus says: **“If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth”** (v 31–32).

To which Pilate responds: **“Fake news. What is truth? There’s no truth”** (Jn 18:38). So cynical. So dismissive. Conversation over. Pilate doesn’t care one whit about truth. He doesn’t care whether truth exists or if it’s possible to know the truth. He doesn’t care that Jesus is innocent or the Son of God. What matters to Pilate is power, not truth, and the power’s all in his hands. Why, he’s got the power of Rome behind him—of Roman legions and the Roman emperor, Tiberius Caesar. Whatever servants Jesus has, they’re no match for Rome!

Again, Jesus says, **“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”** (v 32).

To which the Jews who believed in Him say, **“Fact check. We’re the seed of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.** You can’t fool us. We’re already free” (v 33). They’re not buying it. They know what slaves are, and they’re most definitely not slaves. They don’t care that all the promises made to Abraham point to Jesus. What matters to them is that they themselves are descendants of Abraham, a free man. Why, they claim the land as their inheritance. Whatever freedom Jesus is preaching, they don’t care about it. They’re already free in every way that matters to them.

3.B.

Jesus says, “**You will know the truth,**” but it’s not just Pilate who treats truth as fake news, not just Pilate who’s skeptical of truth, not just Pilate who see everything in terms of raw power. The world today is filled with Pilates. Truth, you say? What is truth? Power is all that matters! The winner gets to decide what truth is. The victor gets to define what truth means. Or we hear that truth is subjective, personal, private. Jesus has His truth, you have your truth, and I have my truth, and don’t you dare try to impose His truth or your truth on anyone else! Why, truth itself is considered fake news!

How much of Pilate is inside us, too? There’s a good bit of him in me. How often am I tempted to think of truth as something squishy, unknowable, changing with the times and circumstances? Too often. How often do I hear the truth spoken to me in love, yet I find a way to push back against it, contradict it, or explain it away? Too often. How often have I acted as though God’s word weren’t universally and completely true? How often have I put my trust in power, rather than in truth? Too often. Too often. When Jesus stood before Pilate, it was Pilate who really stood condemned—Pilate the truth-denier, Pilate the coward, Pilate the disciple of power.

Again, Jesus says, “**The truth will set you free,**” but it’s not just the Jews who believed in Him who fact check His offer of freedom, not just those Jews who claim to have all the freedom they need. The world today is filled with such people. Free, you say? We’re already free! We’ve got the right to define our own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life! That’s what the Supreme Court said in the case of Planned Parenthood versus Casey. What could be freer than that? I can be whoever or whatever I want! Why, the fact is we’re totally free, baby!

And how much of this is inside us? A great deal, I think. How often are we tempted to think that we’re already living free because we can do, say, and think whatever we want? Too often. How often have we made this kind of freedom our idol? Too often. How often does someone point out our dependency and slavery to things of this world—to cell phone or alcohol or whatever—and we deny it? Too often. We tell ourselves that we could quit any time. No one owns my body. No one tells me what to do. When the Jews stood before Jesus and said they’d never been enslaved to anyone, they were in bondage. Jesus was the free one.

2.A.

Have your own truth, do you? Totally free, are you? How’s all that working out?

How well does it work to create your own truth? Personally, I find reality to be a stubborn thing. The created world is solid, not squishy. If you ever try to walk through

a wall, you'll know what I mean, and you'll have the bruises to prove it. Two plus two will always be four, no matter how much power someone has. Truth exists. Right and wrong, good and evil are real things. God is true, and He baked truth into our world. It's there in the order and structure around us, even the order and structure of morality. It's there even if we can't see it or understand it. And truth is there in God's word—the truth about us, the truth about Him. Pilate tried to wash his hands of the truth, but he couldn't.

How about the claim never to have been enslaved? Is it really freedom if we're enslaved to our own concept of existence? If we're enslaved to our passions and desires, to our cravings and wants, to our fears and worries? Even if you could get free of everyone and everything else, you can't get free of yourself. We're born enslaved to ourselves, bent on serving ourselves, coiled so that we can only see ourselves. How well do you turn your thoughts, words, and deeds to serve someone besides yourself? The very moment I try, I'm back enslaved to myself again, just like the Jews who were speaking with Jesus.

2.B.

You want to know the truth? Here it is, straight from Jesus: "**Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin**" (v 34). Let me ask you: Do you commit sin? Do I commit sin? And what does the fact of sin say about us? Never been enslaved to anyone, huh? Except myself and my own sin!

Martin Luther was no stranger to these things. He knew what it was to have power overrule truth. When he was given twenty-four hours to recant his writings, Luther came back and said, "*Unless you can convince me from Scripture and plain reason that what I have written is false, I cannot and will not recant. My conscience is held captive to the word of God. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.*" What Luther said still stands: Power does not determine the truth—not the power of Pilate and the Roman legions, not the power of the Pope and the Roman Church, not the powers that be in our world today. Truth is God's. It comes from God. He built truth into this world and revealed truth in Holy Scripture.

Martin Luther also knew what it is to be a slave to oneself. He felt that bondage so keenly. He knew that he stood under God's wrath, as it says in Romans. "**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Rom 3:23). He knew what it was to be condemned by the righteousness of the law, to be under the yoke of works, to be stuck on a hamster wheel of sin. Even if you're doing what you really want to do, just how free does that make you? And Luther discovered that he couldn't free himself—no

matter how many hours he spent on the hard, cold floor of his cell, how often he went to confession, or how many prayers he said. He couldn't set himself free.

1.

Now the answer to this fake news and fact checking isn't to lament the state of the world or point fingers elsewhere. The Festival of the Reformation isn't about making a victory lap or proclaiming how we've gotten it so right and everyone else has gotten it so wrong. It's about repentance. It's about having our eyes opened to *our* own denials of the truth. It's about having the layers peeled back that expose our slavery and pull to sin. Repentance isn't a work we do. God brings us to repentance through His word, in particular through His law. And it's a way of life—ongoing, daily, moment-by-moment. “Repent,” John the Baptist preached! “Repent,” said Jesus! “Repent,” echoed Martin Luther. As he wrote in the first of his *Ninety-five Theses*: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Jesus said, “**The slave doesn't remain in the house forever**” (v 35). The slave has no security. The slave has no permanent place. The slave has nowhere to call home. But, He says, “**The son remains forever. So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed**” (vv 35–36).

The Son has come, dear friends, God's truth in the flesh. As our Lord said, “**I am the Way and the Truth and the Life**” (Jn 14:6). The power of this world put Him on the cross. He came to His own, who were enslaved, and they rejected Him. For our denials of the truth and because of our enslavement to sin, He felt the cold hard facts of the nails, the thorns, the wooden cross, and the cold, dark tomb. His blood is the propitiation for our sins. He is the Savior of the world. This is what St. John in the Book of Revelation calls “**the eternal Gospel**” (Rev 14:6). The good news that is for every nation, tribe, language, and people of all times and places.

THIS IS THE GOSPEL TRUTH, THE GOOD NEWS STILL TODAY:
BECAUSE THE SON SETS YOU FREE, YOU ARE FREE INDEED.

This is why Jesus said, “**If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**” We have freedom in Jesus, for Jesus is the truth, and we have Jesus in His Word. So it is a call back to the Word. For there God Himself calls us to repentance, puts our sinful nature to death with Christ, and raises us to the freedom of the new life that loves God and serves the neighbor.

Live in this freedom. Cling to Christ in His Word. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word, not just on occasion but day by day. And, if you, like so many others,

find yourself with a fewer commutes, less commitments, and a schedule more open than in the past, take extra time in God’s Word. To what better use could we put that time?

For in Jesus and in His Word is the truth—the truth of our Savior and His salvation, **and the truth will set you free.**

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
